

SEAWARD BUSH BRANCH

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Length: 54 kilometres

Opened

Stage 1 Clyde St to Waimatua July 1886

Stage 2 Waimatua to Mokotua January 1888

Stage 3 Mokotua to Gorge Road March 1895

Stage 4 Gorge Road to Waimahaka June 1899

Stage 5 Waimahaka to Tokanui December 1911

Stops: 16

Clyde St

Appleby

Seaward Bush Township

Tisbury

Waimatua

Timpanys

Mokotua

Kapuka

Ashers

Bush Siding

Gorge Road

Titiroa

Waimahaka

Te Peka

Pukewao

Tokanui

Closed:

Completely April 1966

Passenger services: Stopped in June 1960

There aren't all that many compelling reasons to explore this branch line. There are very few remnants to be seen, the scenery is not especially exciting (though pleasant enough) and for many kilometres the line is far from any access points. There are no major settlements en route, though there were 16 "stations". Perhaps though, if travelling to Invercargill after visiting the Catlins, or from Invercargill going to enjoy the scenic and other delights of the Catlins, there may be a little time to view the few vestiges of this branch line.

The line was built to access timber in the south-east of Southland and to open up the land made available for farming. There had been a tramway through the area by the time construction of the line was authorised in 1882. Notwithstanding the 1880s economic depression work proceeded, and stage after stage was opened and able to operate until the opening of the terminus at Tokanui in 1911.

The starting point for exploring this line is Invercargill. The second¹ railway line in New Zealand ran west from Invercargill station, starting in 1864, albeit on wooden rails. These days the station yards remain busy with freight traffic to and from the port at Bluff and with traffic on the Wairio branch which services the coalfields at Ohai to the west. The station hasn't served passengers since The Southerner was cancelled in 2002.² The current station building is in Level Street and is a modern "essentially rectangular, two-storey structure built of poured and prefabricated concrete. The main

feature of all four elevations, and principal visual interest, consists of the rows of jutting bays with corrugated-iron roofs. These bays incorporate broad verandahs beneath.”³

Head south towards Bluff on SH1 (Clyde Street) until there are only trees on the right of the road. After half a kilometre, and immediately after passing Selwyn Street on the left, look for the route of the Seaward Bush line as it branched off to head eastwards. The rail corridor is now a swathe of green between houses and continues to the outskirts of the city, providing a green belt of parks and playgrounds. Continue on SH1 until Elizabeth Street and turn left. Where Elizabeth Street meets Elles Road at a T-junction turn right, and then take the first left again into McQuarrie Street.

At the junction of McQuarrie Street with Brown Street the formation becomes very evident on the left (behind) and right (in front), heading off across the junction along Scott Street. Somewhere prior to this point, there had already been a stop on the branch line called Appleby, which was really only a loop siding for 11 wagons, although it also had a small passenger shelter shed and platform, which none of the others in this area had. Its location is now lost in the mists of time and urban growth.

Continue on Scott Street into the countryside. The site of the Tisbury stop is only 3.2 kilometres from the intersection of Scott and McQuarrie Streets, but somewhere along the way there was yet another stop called Seaward Bush, which was a 22-wagon loop siding. The railway reserve land is on the left-hand side of the road along the straight and flat running to Tisbury, where the location of the station is probably marked by the buildings and yard of “Tisbury Machinery”.

Road and rail continue side by side for the next 2.56 kilometres to Waimatua, although the rail formation has been overwhelmed by agricultural activities. There was a stop at Waimatua and a 46-wagon loop siding. The line ran almost completely straight for another nine kilometres to Mokotua, with a flag station at a place called Timpanys after six kilometres. There is nothing to see at any of these locations or along the way, even though Mokotua was another site with a small passenger shelter shed and platform, and there was a water supply. A loop siding for 29 wagons was also provided.

At the intersection with Clearwater Road the rail corridor goes straight ahead while Gorge Road curves slightly right. The formation can be seen on the left keeping on the flat behind a small hillock. Road and rail converge again at Crook Road and then run side by side for four kilometres. The stop called Kapuka (for a time called Oteramika) was in the vicinity of the intersection of Kapuka Road (north and south). The next stop, at Ashers, was located where the Lignite Pit Scenic Stop café and lakeside gardens now occupy the site of a disused lignite mine. Shortly afterwards the rail embankment on the left rises up as the road dips, and there are a few interesting remnants to be seen, indicating where a trestle took the line over a stream before a short climb over a rise. After the rise look for Faulkner Road on the right and for the rail crossing 200 metres thereafter.

Carry on to the tiny settlement of Gorge Road, which for four years from 1895 to 1899 was the terminus of the line while the next section across the Maitara River was completed. The formation can be seen across the paddocks in the middle distance on the right as one descends slightly to turn into Gorge Road itself.

On the other side of Gorge Road settlement the line crossed (just after Waituna Gorge Road on the right) to run across the plains to the bridge across the Maitara River 2.5 kilometres east. Turn left into Houston Road which then becomes Railway Bridge Road at a Y-junction. The latter is the right-hand fork. If all gates are open it may be possible to get to within 100 metres of the river to see the two iron girder spans left standing when the smaller spans at each end were removed during demolition of the line. The concrete cylinders on which the bridge rested were cast in New Zealand,

and the iron for the superstructure was ordered from England. The works required for the total bridge construction, including the formation across the wide swamp areas on both banks, were heavy and entailed high banks and numerous flood openings.

To pick up the line on the other side of the river, drive to the Maitara River road bridge, and almost immediately afterwards turn left and follow Fleming Road to the intersection with Springfield Road. Turn left into Springfield Road, and drive past a large transport yard to Gray Road on the left. A stop called Titiroa was somewhere in this vicinity. It had a shelter shed, short platform, a loop siding to hold 27 wagons and a loading bank. A cattle yard was served by a short backshunt holding 10 wagons.⁴

Venture along Gray Road a couple of hundred metres and you will see the railway formation which has curved away from the bridge and is now about to curve and run alongside Springfield Road. It crossed Springfield Road and ran through a stand of bush on the left, then curved left and made its way to Waimahaka. Return to turn left into Fleming Road, where the line crossed again 1.5 kilometres from the intersection. The formation came from the left in a shallow cutting and continued on the right in the same manner. It is being used as a farm track these days.

Turn right into Maitara Island-Fortrose Road, and just after Holms Road look for the embankment on the right. The embankment wends its way slightly further out to the right to avoid another couple of small hillocks before crossing the road just after a bridge across an unnamed stream. Continue through Waimahaka, and on the far side look to the left to sight the semi-derelict remains of the 40x30ft goods shed, the name of which can still be seen although very faintly. This was the first goods shed on the line. A 5th class station was provided at Waimahaka, along with an engine shed and a turntable as well as locomotive watering facilities. The Community Centre looks as if it could have been built on the site of the old station building. The goods shed and station area are all on private land and therefore inaccessible. A train crew was stationed at Waimahaka in houses provided by the railways. Waimahaka was the terminus for 12 years, while work was carried out on the extension to Tokanui.

Shortly after leaving Waimahaka on Fortification Road note the formation on the left of the road taking a loop around the back of a rise. The entrance to a farm 2.4 kilometres from Waimahaka is where the line crossed to begin its climb to the summit at 358ft above sea level at Pukewao. There is no point continuing on Fortification Road, as from here on the line climbs and wends its way into and out of hill country and is a considerable distance from the main road. Return to Waimahaka and proceed to Fortrose.

From Waimahaka to the eventual terminus of the line at Tokanui is just over 11 kilometres in a straight line. By road it is 20 kilometres, via Fortrose on the coast. There were two railway stops between Waimahaka and Tokanui – Te Peka and Pukewao, neither of which can be accessed easily by road.

From Fortrose it is 10 kilometres to Wilks Road on the left. Drive as far as you can up this road to get glimpses of the formation making its way along the hillside and through forestry blocks. Wilks Road ends after five or so kilometres so make your way back to the main road and continue to Tokanui less than two kilometres further.

Turn left along McEwan Street once in Tokanui, and proceed to Buckingham Street, which was the location of the station and yards. Look carefully to the left on the junction with Buckingham Street, and a cutting can be made out, indicating where the formation ran into and out of the town. There are the remains of a trestle bridge across a stream just before the cutting, and this is the infamous

spot where the rails were greased to prevent the last train making its way from Tokanui. The event was described thus in *New Zealand Rail Fan* of December 2013:

“Rails on the climb out of Tokanui were greased and the return train soon slipped to a halt. What to do? The orders duly arrived: return to the yard, detach all the wagons, back up to the Samson post and then give her all you’ve got! It worked; no last train had ever departed a terminus with such speed and style.”⁵

There was, not surprisingly perhaps, a turntable and all the other terminus facilities including an engine shed, goods shed and water tank, along with shunting lines and loops. The station and yards area, on the left of Buckingham Street, is now a transport yard/fertiliser depot. A few of the houses on the other side of the road look as if they may have once been railways houses for the train crews, but there is nothing remaining of this once bustling railway site.

¹ The first, from Ferrymead to Christchurch, opened in 1863.

² The Southerner was a passenger express train in New Zealand's South Island between Christchurch and Invercargill via Dunedin along the Main South Line that ran from Tuesday, 1 December 1970 to Sunday, 10 February 2002. It was one of the premier passenger trains in New Zealand and its existence made Invercargill the southernmost passenger station in the world.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southerner_%28New_Zealand_train%29

³ <http://www.railheritage.org.nz/Register/Listing.aspx?c=21&r=13&l=53>

⁴ “Rails to Tokanui: The Seaward Bush Branch is Closed”, *The New Zealand Railway Observer*, Summer 1965-66, pp.108-114

⁵ *New Zealand RailFan*, December 2013, p.50.